

FIELD



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JANE COOPER

A FIELD SYMPOSIUM

JANE COOPER: A *FIELD* SYMPOSIUM

When she died a year ago, Jane Cooper had been writing her remarkable poems for over fifty years; for almost that long, she had been influencing students, colleagues, friends, and readers who learned from her work and her example. She was not prolific: her first book was published when she was forty-four, and her last, *The Flashboat: Poems Collected and Reclaimed* (2000), gathers from only four volumes. But Cooper wrote a great deal more than she published: the standards she set for herself were as astonishingly high as they were for the students and friends whose work she honored with her careful eye and ear.

Though she was a consummate craftswoman, these standards included more than craft; she also required of herself, most centrally, emotional honesty. "No one of my poems can possibly satisfy all the ideals I have for it," she wrote in the Foreword to her collected poems. "And yet to have been allowed these years, always in touch with the thought of what poetry can be, and the struggle to make more truthful poems, seems an incomparable gift."

The truthfulness is not autobiographical (a poem "has to reach beyond autobiography even to stay on the page," she wrote), nor is it merely a matter of acute perception, though that is important: in a late poem, she speaks of trying to write a poem "dense with ordinary detail," but notes that "this poem too must allow for the unseen." As Philip Levine writes (and others in this symposium suggest), the "power resides in both the spoken & the unspoken." While this is true even in early work, the poems of the 1970s and 1980s increasingly explore dream as a route to ever deeper layers of consciousness.

In the same period, and continuing into her later poems, Cooper began to explore social and political material more overtly, moving outward even as she moved more deeply inward. The women's movement gave her impetus to think more explicitly about the lives and work of women like Rosa Luxemburg and Georgia O'Keeffe, as well as women she knew. In *Green Notebook*,

Winter Road, her longest and most ambitious book, she revisited her childhood, addressing in particular the racially-charged question of "Being Southern," as one title has it.

That she returned to childhood in her late poems, and that she concluded her last book with a thirteen-page poem about Willa Cather called "Vocation: A Life," is significant: "Always I have been more interested in the role of time in a writer's work than in any given theme," she wrote. The essays in this symposium trace, by fortunate accident, the trajectory of Jane Cooper's life as lived through her art, beginning with the "earliest fields" of her childhood and ending with the "late winter light" of her later years; they include poems from all of her published books. It is our hope that this brief journey through her work will lead readers to explore more fully the exemplary poems of a woman for whom poetry was a vocation, a gift, and a calling.

PRACTICING FOR DEATH

1

Monarch and fritillary, swallowtail —
Great butterflies red-brown or glossy black,
Spotted or striped or plain,
Each glistening with down —
I chased you through my earliest fields and back
Along a tangled track
To where the woods grew secret, dark and tall.

There you would disappear with a last hover,
Scurry or zigzag purposeless to the eye,
Witless and teasing, yet
Always beyond my net,
Beyond my fluttering hand that could not fly.
Brave alter-mystery,
Always you found some shadow for your cover.

Or I would watch you trembling on a branch
Open and close with pure control your wings
As if a steady hand
Slowly could wind, unwind
The coil that steeled those frail yet tensile springs,
As if unhurried breathings
Had drifted you aloft out of my reach.

Lost beyond reach — yet still I tried to follow
Down your close paths and into the sun again,
For what except to yield
All pleasures of the field
Into a single, gold and gathered grain?
To force the flash of vision
Under my grasp to fill that pulsing hollow?

And what if I garnered death, the fix of art,
Instead of the moving spark I chose to race?
When winter found my hoard
Pinned to a naked board,
Was it my own long-legged, sidelong grace
I had betrayed, the space
Of instant correspondence in the heart?

2

For there were times, after long hours spent
In meadows smelling hot and dry of noon
Where every grass would stir
Shagged over with blue aster,
I would surprise you, dozing, fumbling drone.
Quickly my sliding prison
Would muffle you in clouds of blinding lint.

And I would pinch my net around that weed
You hung from, until beating up and out
In dense, bewildered strivings
You battered with your wings
And head against the deep net's lightstruck throat,
Or loosening your feet
Crawled up the folded shadows of its side.

Then carrying you as hopefully as an egg
Cradled in cotton, I would pause, advance
On cautious legs until
I found someone to kill
The body I had pinioned in its dance —
Small, ignorant, intense
And homely engine of the whirligig.

Still in odd dreams I ponder, was it strength
Never to bear the final act of prey?
What native cowardice

Clamped me as in a vise
Before the oozing glamor of decay?
Elusive adversary,
I brought no stillness to your labyrinth.

Even the fields that beckoned then seemed wild,
Shimmering with sun-traps and cloud-plays.
I watch as you alight
And the old conquering fright
Fills up my throat. When shall I learn to praise
Tracing you down dark ways
Once more, live butterflies? ablaze, scared child!

“ABLAZE, SCARED CHILD!”

There are 47 kinds of birds flashing in and out of Jane Cooper's *The Flashboat*. But I'm not going to write about Jane's leave-taking herons, or her phoebes insisting “no more elegies!,” or her non-strutting rooster refusing to strut though lower-cased Princeton. Today I'll write about Jane's butterflies.

First, a personal note. Flashback to the 1970s: Jane Cooper, one of my first poetry teachers, was everything I didn't want to be as a poet. She wore wool skirts, sweater sets, and sensible shoes. Her voice was high and fluty. She pronounced the word “sexual” with a liquid x. She didn't smoke. She said “dearie.” Her poems had birds in them, and she knew the names of those birds. She told me once that her hope was to someday be considered a “first-rate minor poet.”

I was horrified. “I greet you at the beginning of a great career,” Emerson wrote to Whitman. How horrible if he had said, “I greet you at the beginning of a minor career.” Better to jump, then. Isn't that why Berryman did it? Isn't that why Plath, Sexton, Frank Stanford? Even Lowell, in a way, in his taxi? Even Keats, to come down with that mortal cold, or Rilke, to prick his finger on that rose?

I was convinced, along with my other young genius friends, that if we weren't to be the great poets, we'd rather be dead poets. I think, for so many years after that that it hurts to admit, I actually felt *superior* to Jane. I was still wanting to be the great poet; she was only wanting to be the good one. How wrong I was. I'm glad I lived long enough to understand how wrong.

Re-reading her first book *The Weather of Six Mornings* (1969), I suddenly saw Jane as a young woman, younger than myself when I first knew her, coming into her glory: a marvelous combination of brilliance and bravado, terror and temerity, dressed in sensible shoes.

It's hard enough to write about birds — but butterflies! Sappy Subject Trap Number One for a young woman poet of Jane Cooper's generation, and she certainly knew it. (To know what it was like to be a gifted — ergo, conflicted — young white southern

woman of her time, read her still-important 1974 essay/memoir/meditation “Nothing Has Been Used in the Manufacture of This Poetry That Could Have Been Used in the Manufacture of Bread.”) But Jane will have her butterfly poem (Wordsworth had several!). And like the obedient elusive butterflies that they are, they’ll show themselves to us but they won’t stay long. “Monarch and fritillary, swallowtail —”: they’re the first onstage, and for an instant, they hold their assigned places in a breathless but stately iambic line; they’re the center of our attention for three more lines until our speaker races on stage: our little girl poet, chasing beauty.

For three more stanzas, one young girl “of long-legged, side-long grace” chases butterflies. They disappear into the woods (all the best spiritual journeys start in the first stanza); they coil and uncoil under her gaze like music under a tender microscope (stanza 3), or they disappear into high darkness or wide sunlight, where poetry and philosophy are indivisible (think about stanza 4).

Poets have been chasing beauty for a long time. In “Practicing for Death,” Jane Cooper shakes Keats’ Grecian urn, and butterflies fly out.

Or I would watch you trembling on a branch

Jane had been touched, she writes in that essay “Nothing Has Been Used...,” by John Crowe Ransom’s notion that it is “the specific detail, intimately rendered, that reveals our love for a subject.” “Specific” and “intimate” are the key words here. I don’t know whether she knew Ransom’s words before or after she wrote “Practicing for Death,” but no matter. We see and hear it in her, in even her earliest work; it could not have been Ransom who introduced her to the idea, but perhaps he offered her this beautiful and succinct phrasing of what had always been her personal and artistic way of being.

Jane Cooper also had a gorgeous “ear” for poetry. She could hear, and make us hear, what Edith Sitwell called “the texture of words.” “Practicing for Death” — if it wasn’t so daunting to think of Jane Cooper this way — is a virtuoso performance of playing by that ear and playing by the score. There are the delicious as-

sonances and consonances carrying us along; there are the obvious and not-so-obvious rhymes, half rhymes, internal rhymes and homophones that are part of what keep her lines fluid and surprising, yet feeling inevitable — like the elusive zig-zagging of butterflies. She seems to be singing even when she's speaking ("those frail yet tensile springs") and vice versa ("the deep net's lightstruck throat"). Move over, Tennyson, and your innumerable bees; here comes Jane Cooper — listen to all those "air" and "er" sounds droning in summer's late languorous afternoon, insect-whirring heat: "For there were times, after long hours spent / In meadows smelling hot and dry of noon, / Where every grass would stir / Shagged overer with blue asterer, / I would surprise you...."

*And what if I garnered death, the fix of art,
Instead of the moving spark I chose to race?*

I'm old enough now to read Jane Cooper with a new appreciation of her craft, and I'm dutifully embarrassed to see how much I missed noticing when I was younger. But what I've cared about most in her work is not her technical virtuosity; it's her "moving spark."

What makes Jane Cooper an indispensable poet for me is the example of her fine, loyal and "tangled track" in claiming and reclaiming herself as poet, and her openness and generosity in writing about it, in both poetry and prose.

What makes Jane Cooper a necessary poet is that, out of her own conflicts, she managed to create a poetry, a poetics really, of both sacrifice and amplitude. We can build on this, because we have all experienced that conflict within ourselves. She has enlarged what can be written about, spoken about, imagined.

What I love about Jane Cooper's "Practicing for Death" (which is what life is, after all) is the difficult, beautiful question it asks us: how can we, as poets, as people, most adequately, most abundantly, most accurately — without self-congratulation or self-destruction — honor the deepest "correspondences" of our hearts?

We know, by the end of the poem, that Jane managed to nab a few butterflies.

We know, even at the end of her noble life, that Jane was still asking how to turn “prey” into “praise.” And “Practicing for Death” is, of course, a prayer.

IN THE LAST FEW MOMENTS CAME
THE OLD GERMAN CLEANING WOMAN

Our last morning in that long room,
Our little world, I could not cry
But went about the Sunday chores
— Coffee and eggs and newspapers —
As if your plane would never fly,
As if we were stopped there for all time.

Wanting to fix by ritual
The marriage we could never share
I creaked to stove and back again.
Leaves in the stiffening New York sun
Clattered like plates; the sky was bare —
I tripped and let your full cup fall.

Coffee scalded your wrist and that
Was the first natural grief we knew.
Others followed after years:
Dry fodder swallowed, then the tears
When mop in hand the old world through
The door pressed, dutiful, idiot.

THE STORY THE SURFACE CANNOT SAY

This poem has always stirred me. It's a love poem struck through with regret — and illuminated by contained rage. Contained in its rhymed stanzas, as we are constrained in time (the medium of this poem and the reason for the rage), the utterance quietly presses hard at its own edges, the surface civil and calm, while a near hysterical grief is held in and in — until it breaks open like a door.

The rhymes tell the story the surface cannot say. The *room*, rhymed with *time* — is time, which allows the lovers these last moments together, and which will separate them for years to come. That our speaker already knows this (now and then) is what she suffers. That her *cry*, rhymed with *fly* (which is what her lover is about to do), is unuttered makes it even more loud. And the *chores* linked with *newspapers* intuit what the poem doesn't state — somewhere the world is at war. These times are extreme. The long room is all time. Their domesticity is a temporary make-believe. And the war isn't over: the poet, writing from now looking back to then, is still there. This is the story that still burns in her heart.

In the second stanza, the story within the linked words deepens. What they *share* is *bare*. Naked as lovers, empty as a cupboard, rationed, measured out — fleetingly erotic and gone.

The *ritual* rhymed and ruined with the word *fall* recalls Eve's first separation — why did she drop his full cup? The accident animates what is not allowed to be said: Her rage at him? Her rage at herself? The full cup breaks, although we don't hear that outright — we hear it in our speaker, *creaking* to the stove, in the leaves *stiffening*, and in the *clattered* plates: she is already brittle and old.

But it's the third stanza, perhaps because of the extraordinary containment in the first two, that always makes the hair stand up on my arms. She hurts him ("The coffee scalded your wrist"), wounds him by her stumble (her tripping over the invisible, the unsaid), and the hot coffee falls.

It's then that *knew* is rhymed with *through*. And *tears* with *years* — for they both see and know. As the poet knows — oh now more than then, which is how the poem turns suddenly fierce, turns against her and time and necessity and the cleaning woman when it rhymes the word *that* with the last word in the poem, *idiot*.

Who is the idiot? The old German cleaning woman surely, dutiful, about to clean up any evidence of their presence together — time itself embodied, knocking at the door. And of course the poet herself, who, speaking with such sudden and uncontained contempt, reveals how deeply the loss has carved a place in her containment. That idiot. The cleaning woman. Herself.

The subliminal poem is what stays with me. The unconscious life of the poem, vivid and newly painful each time I read it. The turn towards self-recrimination — animating, briefly, what might have been, and is not, and never was, and is no more.

HOLDING OUT

Letters come, the phone rings, you sit by your window
balancing yourself like a last glass of water.

All over the city the hospitals are crammed with wounded.
Divorce, like marriage, requires two adversaries.

But what is left now is not to exaggerate:
your grief, his grief — these serious possessions.

ENDURANCE

Why does this simple poem possess so much power, why does the initial reading of it ask for another reading & still another? Let me attempt some answers by suggesting that its power resides both in the spoken & the unspoken, & that the conversation the poem enacts is so dramatic that it forces itself to end because it has overwhelmed the consciousness at the center. The letters which arrive, the telephone calls — answered or not — haven't the authority to break in on this treasured though painful dialogue. Notice that each couplet possesses a startling remark: in the first stanza it is the difficult balancing act. Consider the alternative, the loss of balancing oneself like a glass of water, not an ordinary glass of water but a precious final one: the result is spillage, not merely of water but of an internal balance that most certainly will result in tears or worse, possibly temporary madness.

The focus abruptly shifts in the second stanza to the city which lies outside the window & insists on its presence. Although the private drama is overwhelmed, perhaps even belittled — in a public sense — by the hospitals crammed with those with physical wounds — & possibly mental ones as well —, the personal takes precedence over the pain of the larger world. Divorce, we know, takes two adversaries, but marriage? In the wisdom of the poem, yes, marriage also.

The third stanza provides us with the lesson: the listener — & let me suggest here that the listener is the speaker trying her best to behave with the composure & dignity she prefers — is told not to make more of her crisis than it merits, especially because it brings with it two helpings of extraordinary grief, his & yours. These are not trivial items: they are "serious possessions." In the precise & restrained use of language under enormous emotional pressure, Jane Cooper's little poem reminds one of the exactitude & power of ancient Chinese poetry, & reminds me especially of another six-line poem, this by Wu Han, another poem of grief from lost love:

GONE

The sound of her silk skirt has stopped.
On the marble pavement dust grows.
Her empty room is cold & still.
Fallen leaves are piled against the doors.
Longing for that lovely lady
How can I bring my aching heart to rest?

translated by Arthur Waley

In the Chinese poem there is a strong suggestion that the loss is through death; whether or not this is preferable to loss through estrangement I can't say. In both poems the balance of the spoken & unspoken adds to both the mystery & the tension; both are about "holding out," that is surviving traumatic loss & still living within one's own sense of decorum. It is interesting to note that when Ezra Pound translated this poem — it's in *Personae*, his collection of 1912 — he fudged on the final line. The good Imagist Ezra wrote, "A wet leaf that clings to the threshold," a sense totally absent from the four other translations I consulted. Was he afraid of "my aching heart"? He was writing before country western music seized international attention & would make the line sound worse than it is. Jane Cooper, however, is unafraid to call grief by its name, & indeed in her short & brave poem is unafraid of anything except tactlessness. She treats her reader with the same respect she would ask of all poetry; she does so continually, & that is why her poetry will survive.

THE FLASHBOAT

1

A high deck. Blue skies overhead. White distance.
The wind on my tongue. A day of days. From the shore a church-
bell clangs.
Below me the grinding of floes: tiny families huddled together
earth-colored. Let me explain, the ice is cracking free.
They were cut off unawares. From the shore a churchbell clangs.
When the ice breaks up it is spring. No
comfort, no comfort.

2

And here is that part of my dream I would like to forget. The
purser is at his desk, he is leaning toward me out of his seat, he
is my torturer who assumes we think alike. Again and again he
questions me as to which national boundaries I plan to cross. *Are
you a political activist? No, I'm a teacher.* But already the villagers
have been swept out to sea. We are cruising north of the Arctic
Circle. Without haste he locks my passport away in his breast
pocket. Was I wrong to declare myself innocent?

3

(I did not protest. I spoke nothing but the truth. I never spoke of
that girl who kneeled by her skyscraper window, falling without
a sound through the New York City night.)

4

Now it's our turn. Three A.M.
and the Queen Mary is sinking.
All is bustle — but in grays. Red lanterns crawl here and there.
The crew makes ready the boats. One near me, broad but shallow,
looks safe, women are urged, the captain will be in charge.

Far down now: a trough. A smaller dory rocks
in and out of our lights; black fists grip the oars.

Room only for six — we will
all need to row.

For a moment I hesitate, worrying about my defective blood.

A rope ladder drops over. My voice with its crunch of bone

wakes me: *I choose*

the flashboat!

work,

the starry waters

DREAMWORDS

I love "The Flashboat" — you know dreamwords when you hear them! — for its beauty and its courage. In those ways it seems to me to be a signature poem of Jane Cooper's. I love the beauty and the courage of its choice: I imagine it as a continuing choice, with continuing dream- and poem-light shining on it, over many years: *"I choose / the flashboat!"*

Sometimes I think of Jane Cooper and Eleanor Ross Taylor together, in a few ways: they were both Southern, very close in age, and both highly educated, by institutions and by their own selves. Both have/had the impression — as Elizabeth Bishop did, too — that they hadn't written much. But what is "much"? I feel what those women wrote and published (so far!) is a fullness. Perhaps our ideas of measurement are changing. And both Cooper and Taylor were going to collide, Cooper more, with politics: class, money, convention, race, inner survival.

People say, about others usually, "She fell far from the tree." Often, I'd say, it's not falling but flying; and then a long (if you're lucky) triathlon.

In "The Flashboat," 1: The first two lines are high-class, with a pleasing aspect:

A high deck. Blue skies overhead. White distance.
The wind on my tongue. A day of days. From the shore a
churchbell clangs.

But a hint of change: "White distance." "clangs." Then:

Below me the grinding of floes: tiny families huddled together
earth-colored. Let me explain, the ice is cracking free.
They were cut off unawares. From the shore a churchbell
clangs.

Again, the churchbell. And the distance: "tiny" families. "Earth-colored." What color is that? But the ice is cracking "free."

The next two lines:

When the ice breaks up it is spring. No
comfort, no comfort.

For a minute, things seem more cheerful; but no. There is a world of turn in those seven lines, reflected in their leisurely 7 or 6 beats that shift down to 4, then 2; a motion that will be repeated in the poem's fourth section — a motion towards seriousness.

2: "... I would like to forget." And indeed here the dream is at its most rational; in prose; perhaps it is half-forgotten or censored. It seems the speaker here is arguing half with others and half with herself.

3: Prose again: a parenthetical swerve, the nothing-but-the-truth lie. "That girl" whom the poet, or at any rate the dream, remembers.

4: "Now it's our turn." (After that girl's turn?)

All is bustle — but in grays. Red lanterns crawl here and there.
The crew makes ready the boats. One near me, broad but
shallow,
looks safe, women are urged, the captain will be in charge.
Far down now: a trough. A smaller dory rocks
in and out of our lights; black fists grip the oars.

"Fists" — land blows; signal protest, anger, strength, danger. And then "My voice with its crunch of bone" takes me back to "the grinding of floes" and "the ice is cracking free":

For a moment I hesitate, worrying about my defective blood.
A rope ladder drops over. My voice with its crunch of bone
wakes me: *I choose*
the flashboat!

work,

the starry waters

I last saw Jane Cooper a few weeks before she died; she was very thin, and her eyes were welcoming. She asked me about my poetry, and I said I was meeting now and then with some poets she knew, to share our work. She said, "I'd like to be there with you, ahead of time!"

By and by she said it was time for her to go to her reading group, a group of some of her best friends in the retirement community. "What are you reading?" I asked. A huge smile: "Dante's *Inferno*." "Oh Jane. Couldn't it at least be *Purgatorio*?" Another huge, rather affectionately mocking smile: "No — we have to go in the proper order."

THE BLUE ANCHOR

The future weighs down on me
just like a wall of light!

All these years
I've lived by necessity.
Now the world shines
like an empty room
clean all the way to the rafters.

The room might be waiting for its first tenants —
a bed, a chair, my old typewriter.

Or it might be Van Gogh's room
at Arles:
so neat, while his eyes grazed among phosphorus.
A blue anchor.

To live in the future
like a survivor!
Not the first step up the beach
but the second
then the third

— never forgetting
the wingprint of the mountain
over the fragile human settlement —

THE FRAGILE HUMAN SETTLEMENT

I have always loved this poem by Jane Cooper.

Sure, it begins with a fairly familiar word coupling, future/weights, but then — because she knows it's fairly familiar — she gives it new resonance by comparing it to a wall (something that blocks us rather than weighing down on us) of light. Light: we can walk through that, it has no weight. There are contradictory notions at work here but the future is in the affirmative. I can't recall a more appropriate, earned, and courageous exclamation point in contemporary American poetry!

The second stanza continues this affirmation. The speaker has lived many years "by necessity": bare bones, paycheck to paycheck, doing the necessary work, the appointed tasks? The next simile parallels the simile in the first stanza, an overwhelmingly large thing, the world, compared to a room "clean all the way to the rafters." That's a *very* clean room! A room full of hope.

This room doesn't need much, only what's necessary: a bed ("I have sleep to do / I have work to dream"*), a chair, the speaker's old typewriter. The use of the provisional ("might be") is smart here, is very deliberate. It would seem immodest since it might also be Van Gogh's room at Arles (we've all seen the paintings). This turn to Van Gogh provides for me a stunning and accurate metaphor for the genius of his vision and its execution: "his eyes grazed among phosphorus." "Grazed" is a brilliant verb here with its cows and bucolic connotations and then it turns, with the beautiful logic of illogic, to a tasty, tasty word, "phosphorus," a yellowish wax-like chemical that glows in the dark. It is also used as a fertilizer and, I believe, as a component in certain explosives. *All* of the connotations are right! We never have to read a line of art criticism about Van Gogh again! All we have to do is look at the paintings.

And, of course, that vision, that possibility, that hope, is a blue anchor! It holds us fast, keeps us from being dashed upon the rocks, and is also the color of sky, and of sadness.

The penultimate stanza is the most joyous: the survivors have somehow made it ashore, one, two, even three steps ashore.

The waves, the tides will still be calling us back, but three steps:
that's a foothold.

The final turn, surprising yet inevitable, in the last stanza, has always battered my heart (more than three times). That "wingprint" is a perfect word here, a perfect spondee, to describe the shadow of the mountain that someday might, that someday will, come falling down on our fragile settlement.

This poem has always struck me as a small masterpiece. I am glad to say that in print.

*Bill Knott

THE GREEN NOTEBOOK

There are 64 panes in each window of the Harrisville church
where we sit listening to a late Haydn quartet. Near the ceiling
clouds
build up, slowly brightening, then disperse, till the evening sky
glistens like the pink inside of a shell over uncropped grass,
over a few slant graves.

At Sargent Pond the hollows are the color of strong tea.
Looking down you can see decomposed weeds and the muscular
bronze and green
stems of some water lilies. Out there on the float
three figures hang between water and air, the heat breathes them,
they no longer speak.
It is a seamless July afternoon.

Nameless. Slowly gathering. . . . It seems I am on the edge
of discovering the green notebook containing all the poems of my
life,
I mean the ones I never wrote. The meadow turns intensely
green.
The notebook is under my fingers. I read. My companions read.
Now thunder joins in, scurry of leaves. . . .

SEAMLESS, NAMELESS

In the Foreword to her collected poems, Jane Cooper wrote: "Mystery and clarity: these have been my concerns from the beginning. The mystery of our existence on earth. The clarity of a moment's elucidation which is the poem." What is perhaps most astonishing to me about Cooper's work is the subtle tension, almost but never completely resolved, between those two apparent opposites. While the casual reader may be most moved by the clarity of detail, the returning reader will discover almost inexpressible depths within and among the carefully perceived and meticulously crafted moments of lucidity.

"The Green Notebook" seems structurally determined by such tension: two stanzas of apparent clarity followed by a more mysterious third one, and a similar movement within each of the first two stanzas. But the mystery is in fact more difficult to chart, relying as it does on subtle transformations of virtually every image of the poem.

The first line and a half are almost prosaically clear: "There are 64 panes in each window of the Harrisville church / where we sit listening to a late Haydn quartet." But then the poet's eye begins to use the counted panes to fuse outside and inside, beginning with a stunning line break that conflates the two: for a moment, we can almost see "ceiling clouds." As the clouds disperse, we hear as well as see the mood lift: "we sit *listening*," the clouds are "*brightening*," the "*sky / glistens*." But the stanza ends with an abruptly short line, with the "few slant graves" that seem, in their evocation of tombstones, like a transformation and reduction of the window panes. And then we may recall that it is a "late" quartet, an "evening" sky, and may perhaps consider that those 64 panes might have had some special relevance for a poet writing in her sixties.

The opening of the second stanza is again marked by factual specificity: "At Sargent Pond the hollows are the color of strong tea." This time, though, the clarity depends on metaphor, and the "hollows" carry the weight of the preceding stanza's graves. Other elements of the first stanza are also echoed: the cemetery's

"uncropped grass" modulates into "decomposed weeds," the unclouding sky into the space "between water and air." Though the image of the three figures on the float is initially precise, "float" acts almost like a verb, beginning a movement that makes them increasingly elusive: they "hang between water and air," a space even more strange and fused than the "ceiling clouds" of the first stanza; "the heat breathes them," not the predictable reverse; finally, "they no longer speak." As surely as the graves take us earthwards, the figures raise us up: death, transfiguration. Evening is now afternoon; viewer is now visionary.

Whether the speaker sitting in the church has drifted mentally into a remembered place, or whether the scene has actually shifted, is never quite clear: by the end of the poem, the fusion of actual and mental space is so complete that the drift across the porous boundary — between outside and inside, between scene and vision — itself suggests a poetics.

The drift into the last stanza is linguistic: "seamless" becomes "Nameless," and we are suddenly in two places at once, the word applicable both to the perceived graves and to the figures on the float. And to something else as well: who, what is "Slowly gathering"? If we sense that the dispersed clouds of the first stanza have reappeared, the "thunder" of the last line will confirm that; but there are other gatherings in this stanza, which reverses the terms of the previous one, making the visionary familiar instead of the reverse.

Again, a brilliant line break: "It seems I am on the edge" anticipates an about-to-be-transformed physical place, like the float; but the poet is instead on the more astonishing edge "of discovering the green notebook" of the title. *The notebook*, as if its existence were given. And then the vision comes rapidly. "All the poems of my life" becomes "the ones I never wrote" — words that startle me each time I read them: what courage, to write (even to dream) of such poems, and then to make them do the poetic work of transfiguring the world, as the meadow (a recasting of "uncropped grass" and "decomposed weeds") turns as "intensely green" as the notebook. Then the "discovery" is complete: "The notebook is under my fingers." The poems are gathered, on

pages that may recall both the implied musical score and the window panes, and the performers are gathered as well: "I read. My companions read." The concert in the church has become a performance of poems; the poems the poet never wrote have been miraculously written into these few short lines.

After such a climactic moment, what denouement? The last line in fact continues the transformation of world through poem, as "thunder joins in" (joins!) the increasingly grand performance. Of course thunder means rain, and creates the "scurry of leaves," suggesting that the performance may have been cancelled and the audience made to depart. But the scurrying leaves — which evoke both the color and the pages of the notebook — are performers, too: departure joins performance. And then a period. And then an ellipsis. End, but not. We *shall* all be changed, and this poem, these poems, will help to change us.

THE WINTER ROAD

*. . . they have passed into the world as
abstractions, no one seeing what they are*
— GEORGIA O'KEEFFE (1887-1986)

1

Late winter light

Suppose it comes from the snow
blowing all day across your winter road
umber with violet shadows

Or suppose it comes from some energy farther away
that may never be understood
to keep us from repetition
from reciting the litany of loss

The last uncoupling of the galaxies —
how can that be understood?

You stand on a ridge facing silence
You lift your brush

2

Curve of an arm
Ripple of muscles down extended back
Rib cage of cliffs

The eye lays bare the muscle-rows of speech
the prehistoric arteries

It can all be told in color and light and line

Only recompose

the original soft palaver of the earth

earth red earth orange earth purple

pale Naples yellow ochres

even the soft earth greens

Clarify

Or take this "Fragment of the Ranchos de Taos Church," its
Mediterranean statement

blue of the Isles

calm butte archaic thigh

3

Blue

Blue curtains opening on a gray sky

"Black Rock with Blue"

"Sky Above Clouds"

After all men's destruction has been honed away
by the winds that wrap the stars
still there will be blue

Half-blind you go on painting
in a blue smock

And the road past your house
exaltation of a pear!
carves out the socket
of a hill, then orbits clean off the canvas
bound for *Espanola, Santa Fe and the world*

always there, always going away

tireless calligraphy
on snow without horizon

4

Where I have been

Where I have been is of no importance
To live to be a hundred is of no importance
only *what I have done* with it

But we love the particular

Where I was born

Where I was born is of no importance
torn shoe, nursing mouth, patchwork-cushioned chair
still rocking quietly in the light wind
of a later summer evening of some life

Nor how I have lived

with a handful of rocks
a wooden bodhisattva in a niche
a black door
and the continuous great adventure of the sky

Only what I have made of it
what I have been able to finish
To live to be a hundred is of no importance
This landscape is not human
I was meant to take nothing away

RECOMPOSING

Jane Cooper's act is of generosity and of wanting a human connection, particularly in her third book, *Green Notebook, Winter Road*, the title of which is a composite of the first and one of the last poems in the book, making the book itself a multiplicity of the voices inside it. The poem "The Green Notebook" has a subject worthy of the gesture its title lends itself to — which is to say, no subject at all other than Cooper face to face with "all the poems...I never wrote." A lesser writer might despair here and perhaps start writing like all get out, but Cooper chooses the opposite reaction, the one of ultimate generosity: "I read. My companions read." She is willing to share with not only the human but with all creation: "Now thunder joins in, scurry of leaves...."

I'm in love with her punctuation, her architecture of line and poem: all of it is against grasping, against forcing meaning from either self, poem, or reader, all of it is a fluid act of creation that moves back and forth until one is unsure of boundaries between figures. Small wonder then that among the artists she writes to in poems of this book are Georgia O'Keeffe and Willa Cather, a painter and a writer who each created universes where, as Lisel Mueller wrote, "wisteria is not separate from the bridge it covers."

"The Winter Road" opens with atmosphere — "Late winter light" — and then quickly two stanzas of pondering on the atmosphere. One is not content to merely live in the world unthinking, but ought to be engaged actively in one's own life. There are two versions of musing; in the first, Cooper is concerned with practicalities — "Suppose it comes from the snow / blowing all day across your winter road" — and in the second she considers the deeper implications — "Or suppose it comes from some energy farther away / that may never be understood." For a moment it seems Cooper will do the "simple" thing, which is to choose to merely recognize the unknowable immensity of the universe's actions, but she is discontent with mere wonder: "The last uncoupling of the galaxies — / how can that be understood?"

In Cooper's first book, *The Weather of Six Mornings*, she ended the closing sequence with the legendary throwing up of

hands to eternity: "To the sea of received silence // why should I sign / my name?" But by this book, half a century later, writing of O'Keeffe, the artist is ready to confront complete unknowableness ("the last uncoupling of the galaxies") like so: "You stand on a ridge facing silence / You lift your brush."

In the second section of the poem the artist confronts the landscape, which takes on characteristics of the human body: "Curve of an arm / Ripple of muscles down extended back / Rib cage of cliffs." Cooper does the subtlest things, for example separating the words "rib" and "cage." She has faith here in the possibilities of communication in the fractured world. "It can all be told," she maintains, "in color and light and line," but it's the process itself that's important. One must "recompose," an active reconstruction, she suggests, the opposite of "decompose," and not merely "compose," as one might ordinarily write.

Her words mix and mingle with O'Keeffe's own writings, appearing as italics in the Cooper text, and also with the titles of O'Keeffe's paintings, which appear in quotes, giving the whole a dynamic quality of real life flying together from the sundry sources. The body of the landscape itself is likened in the closing stanza of the section to a painting of O'Keeffe's of the desert that likewise recalls a distant source: "Mediterranean statement / blue of the Isles."

When the landscape is a human body, is a distant landscape, is itself and a painting of itself at once, one begins to get the feeling the existing world around one is barely static in either time or space, is barely present at all. Cooper likewise builds in the subtlest reference to ruin and the human body in the closing line, "calm butte archaic thigh." It's that adjective "archaic" that brings to mind Rilke's fragmentary torso, reinforced by the word "Fragment" in the title of the O'Keeffe painting she mentions.

The third part of the poem, which works equally well as an essay or meditation on the artist's person and responsibility in the world, fulfills itself as autobiography in terms of Cooper's stunning artistic achievement. Cooper engages O'Keeffe's continuing to paint though "half blind." It's not determination or will, but a mere practice of her life that "still there will be blue" in the

world and so of course O'Keeffe will continue her "tireless calligraphy." I like that the painting of images is given the status of semic writing, elevating it somehow even while O'Keeffe recognizes the world is simultaneously "*always there, always going away.*"

No painting at all happens in the last section of the poem, just as Cooper herself was silent in print for the last part of her own life. The questions O'Keeffe asks herself and the answers Cooper speaks for her or through her seem to address any artist's relationship to art: it is a natural function, it is not about owning the art, seizing it, making it one's own, but interacting with and being made the richer for it.

"Where I have been is of no importance / [...] // Nor *how I have lived*," she says, "with a handful of rocks / [...] / and the continuous great adventure of the sky // Only what I have made of it." We must be like that then, in our writing lives, in our human lives and in our interactions with the universe around us, creatures who matter only in so much as we interact and bring ourselves into communion with an existing world, not as passive consumers nor as 'makers' but as 'recomposers,' as a painter facing the impassive silence of God, landscape, the human body.

"To live to be a hundred is of no importance," Cooper writes; "This landscape is not human / I was meant to take nothing away." Mere presence of mind and body in the world is not enough, to write desperately back to fill the silence, "to live to be a hundred" is likewise fruitless. Halfway between noise and silence Cooper envisioned an artist in the desert looking off to the blankness of "snow without horizon," though half-blind, accepting that the "uncoupling of galaxies" cannot be understood, but completely unterrified, aware that the act of painting is the act of reading that green notebook itself.

JANE, STAYING

I've never seen you sleep
I've never seen you wake
now I see both your crooked honest mouth

so open

your hands, so soft I could slip them on like gloves

*I need to tell you why I got angry
they're not giving me time for my writing
I know it's crazy, because I'm not writing
but I need to know I have the time for writing*

if I could slip you on, what would I see, who would I be,

if I said it is one great conversation

how would I stop speaking and know I am still speaking

THE GINKGO LIGHT

1

A downy woodpecker drills into a utility pole.
While you cut stems, arrange tulips in a vase,
I catch a down bow on the A string, beginning
of *Song of the Wind*. We savor black beans
with cilantro and rice, pinot noir; as light slants
through the kitchen window, spring is candlelight
at our fingertips. Ice crunches in river
breakup: someone shovels snow in a driveway,
collapses, and, hospitalized, catches staph
infection; out of airplane wreckage, a woman
identifies the ring on the charred corpse
of her spouse; a travel writer whose wife is in
hospice gazes at a lunar eclipse, the orange moon
at one-millionth of its normal brightness.
A 1300-year-old lotus seed germinates; a ginkgo
issues fan-shaped leaves; each hour teems.

A seven-year-old clips magenta lilacs for her mother;

“electrocuted tagging a substation”;

patter of rain on skylight;

manta rays feed along a lit underwater cove;

seducing a patient,

he did not anticipate plummeting into an abyss;

over Siberia, a meteor explodes;

“I am happiest here, now!”

lesser goldfinch with nesting fiber in its beak;

love has no near or far.

Near Bikini Island, the atom bomb mushroomed
into a fireball that obsidianed the azure sky,

splayed palm leaves, iridescent black, in wind;
that fireball moment always lurks behind

the retired pilot's eyes, even when he jokes,
pours vodka, displays his goggles, medal,

leather jacket hanging from a peg. A woman
hums as she works with willow, X-Acto knife,

magnifying lens to restore a Jicarilla Apache
basket; she has no glimmer a zigzag line

is beginning to unravel, does not know within
a decade she will unload a slug into her mouth.

Through a moon gate, budding lotuses in a pond;

"You're it!"

he stressed rational inquiry

then drove south into the woods, put a gun to his head;

vaporized into shadows;

quince and peach trees leafing below the ditch;

succession and simultaneity;

the branch-like shapes in their sheets;

pizzicati:

up the ri-ver we will go.

August 6, 1945: a temple in Hiroshima 1130 meters
from the hypocenter disintegrates, while its ginkgo

buds after the blast. When the temple is rebuilt,
they make exit, entrance steps to the left and right

around it. Sometimes one fingers annihilation
before breaking into bliss. A mother with Alzheimer's

knows her son but not where she lives or when
he visits. During the Cultural Revolution,

Xu-mo scrubbed one million dishes on a tanker
and counted them in a trance. A dew point

is when a musher jogs alongside her sled dogs,
sparing them her weight on the ice to the finish.

Loaves of bread on a rack; a car splashes
a newspaper vendor on a traffic island.
On the road of days, we spot zodiacal light
above the horizon. Astronauts have strewn
footprints and streptococcus on the moon.
Chance sparks the prepared mind: a Cooper's
hawk perched on a cottonwood branch
quickens our synapses. In the orchard,
the sound of apricot blossoms unfolding;
mosquito larvae twitch water at the v-shaped
berm that pools runoff to the pond. We do
not believe we trudge around a flaming
incense burner on a road of years. As fireflies
brighten, we long to shimmer the darkness
with streamers. A pickup veers toward
then away, skewing light across our faces.

As light skews across our faces, we are
momentarily blinded, and, directionless,

have every which way to go. Lobelia
flowers in a patio pot; a neighbor

hands us three Bibb lettuces over a fence.
A cricket stridulates outside the window;

and while we listen to our exhale, inhale,
ephemera become more enduring than concrete.

Ginkgos flare out. A jagged crack
spreads across windshield glass: we find

to recoil from darkness is to feed the darkness,
to suffer in time is — dichotomous venation —

to effloresce the time. One brisk morning,
we snap to layers of overlapping

fanned leaves scattered on the sidewalk,
finger a scar on wrist, scar on abdomen.

THE NEVER

They lie in separate rooms while the moon
spills its light across limbs of trees.
The fake owl poses in the yard next door —
those yellow eyes she saw and thought
it was a Great Horned Owl. The *never*
comes in spurts, like wings across the kitchen
skylight cutting her off from him
during the day. *Never* takes the form of sleep
at night. It's not that *never* belongs
to no one else. Practically anyone
could be happy under the sentence of moon
on gravel, moon on frost, moonlight
on fake owl perched in a willow.
Perhaps the moon is birch wood, she thinks,
and it was part of the *never* before this *never*.
Maybe the wings are obsidian and covered
the skylight when a piece of the Kuiper Belt
exploded above their house. Inside she feels
a bit like *never*. Likes the sound of mingling
with folks that might live there. Likes the fake owl,
who never asks *who*.

& GENERALLY THE FUTURE IS UNCERTAIN

Into or out of meaning, the shop is full
of the singing of birds.

And the second is a story. A story
of the birds as they sing.

A story of the singing.

I only want
what you're unable to give.

The music of the birds
from the ceiling. The pictures of birds
along the wall.

Anything else
isn't worth wanting. The faces
in the window, perhaps.

The children on the sidewalk. The shop
next to another shop.

Some final point you might ask yourself.
Some question.

The plastic flowers on the stand.
The sun across the flowers.

YOU CAN'T SAY NO TO THE WEATHER

The pleasures of the restaurant. All these floating narratives
we can walk in and out of. Later,
maybe a county fair. And later, the Devil
may care. And the tilt-a-whirl. The calliope house.

We liked it but we couldn't say why,
which made us a bit afraid, but also a bit titillated,
as now we had a secret life,
one filled with unexplainable things. The trick
is to make it seem like it really doesn't matter,
like it's merely happening this way.

I'll take some of that lemonade
with six real lemons, then. And I'll have ten dollars
in tickets, please. Easy as pie.

We've said it too many times
and now it's the only thing there is. But isn't that fine too,
in its way? The curve of things
up and around you, the mad rush of air?

They're saying something back behind the courthouse
that might be interesting. Something
about the voices. The way they're waving their arms
and chewing the scenery. In the photographs,
they might be mistaken for statues.

In that way, though, I suppose we all could,
not in the reductive "what it means" way,
but more in the generalized tone of how the world works,
the way the fairground lights fall across our faces
as we're looking up to the little people in the sky
growing ever more luminous and distant.

1st MY CHILDREN

1.

whom I do love is

Polly Collins's gift drawing in what looks like
seam work but is pencil underneath ink
and watercolor applied to paper.
The background of the piece is cloud summer —
each tree, spreading, in its box. Symmetry's
her devotional: such being the shape
of artistry held in a hand.

2.

1854,

June. Each numbered cursive monostich tells,
above the grid of squares, her latest vision,
as, 5th *When upon Earth my care was great*
Afflictions oft I felt . . . The blazing tree
spread before her by an angel "as dis-
tinctly as I ever saw a natural
tree" — as, 6th *When many times*

3.

my frame was shook, This
gave me strength for to perform My Duty . . .
below which, a tree aflame; one tree that
holds out, eight arms full, its fruit, its safe nest;
or this, her largest tree, whose tongues are blooms.
But now my girl calls from her room —
she's hungry. She's bored. She wants a little
attention. So I set the book

4.

aside to listen.

*Are you reading that tree thing again? As,
Though dragon like in manmade form, Some rage
to and fro. As I have raised my voice. Or
raised my hand —. Or, slower fury, have closed
myself off with poems and witless chores.
She's with me three days out of seven.*

The flowers have ears — Polly shapes

5.

her delicate panes

so the picture's a peaceful house — , and full
flat leaves uprisen on pointillist bark.
Once I threw a toy across the room. Once
again I ask my child for forgiveness,
who's singing now with her friend Spongebob.
Now a bright cardinal flicks to the fringe bloom
and starts to whet, like a blade, his

6.

hooked beak. Scatter of

notes — our subsong — beneath the lavender-
lit froth of flowers. I told her a story
once, once a little girl lived in a nice
white house . . . a hundred times and more those nights
I raged to stay in my head. Tomorrow
off she goes. Hold my hand. Before I'm through
this story, we could be asleep.

AUBADE

Take me with you
my mother says
standing in her nightgown
as, home from college,
I prepare to leave
before dawn.
The desolation
she must face
was once my concern
but like a bobber
pulled beneath
the surface
by an inedible fish
she vanished
into the life
he offered her.
It stopped occurring
to me she might return.
I'll be back I say
and then I go.

MAKING STARS WITH JACOB LAWRENCE

The only cardboard we had was the box
where those red-scaled fish were frozen

whole. The grocer who owns the two
stores presented it to us when we

visited his home of cedar pillars glass.
We drank bitter wine ate spongy rolls

with strange cheese discussed
the project of his country.

How the horizon blinked when I
heard water sand in funnels.

The ashen clouds were royal with blue as I
pressed my palm to my chest.

The fish are thawing for today's lunch.
As I flatten the box a plane Jacob draws

seven stars cuts each with a Japanese blade.
On metallic paper they are traced

fourteen times cut with scissors glued
front to back each side a mirror. Fish-line

is attached to each so they may hang from
the sloping boughs of the grumichama.

They sway night's unassertive
light reflects crests craters bounce

from one sterling luminary to another.
Beneath the tree wind-spun stars a play.

A boy missing the moon a wandering
girl humming friends laughing unaware

of his elaborate sorrow. The air will hoard
this occasion in its slender history.

THE UNDERSTANDING

Let's start by saying that Shadow had died. Did Shadow know that Shadow had died? Certainly. Shadow and she were co-partners for years. She was her only executor, her only friend, and the only one who dressed in mourning for Shadow. Shadow wasn't terribly distressed by the sad event and the day of the funeral commemorated it with a banquet.

Shadow didn't erase Shadow's name. The firm conducted its business under the name "Shadow and Shadow." Sometimes new clients called Shadow by Shadow's name; but Shadow answered to both names, as if she, Shadow, were actually Shadow, who had died.

translated by Adam Giannelli

PLEASE, COME IN

Shaking and shivering, just the right fit of trembling.
The wind thrashing its black wings
Against the weathered walls of my house
Seeking to slip into caulked cracks
And knock me down, my head against brick
Or the stainless steel of a trash compactor.
There is elk blood in my refrigerator
Dripping from white butcher paper —
One man's illusionary vision of seduction.
As if a piercing with arrows
Into the throat or heart of a beast
Can load one's soul with love.
There's a barren hole like a small moon crater
Outside my front door, once meant to house a pond
With sun-glistening carp and succulently fat lilies
Like the ones in the muted pastels of Monet.
I've heard it is hell to be in love with a painter —
Better to be in love with the paint.
Blue pigments powdered by the pounding of stones.
Venetian red raked from the breast of a lake bird.
Iron oxides rusting into the purple-black of disfigured figs.
Yellow ochre showing like a sickness on the tongue.
There are children in tie-dyed shirts lying under sheet metal.
A caravan of out-of-work carpenters tented in the field.
I don't have the nerve to invite them in for repairs.
My synapses snarled with the tufted fur
Of coyotes caught in the chain-linked fence.
Looking into the eyes
Of every homeless man I hand two dollars to —
I hate it when they say "*God bless you.*"
There's a torn and crooked trampoline
Out the backside of my house —
We lie on it anyway and look to the night sky.
Neither one of us knowing the nomenclature of stars.

Neither one of us knowing how to leave the night.
There are explosives in barrels in the garage
Three broken-rung ladders
A red vinyl punching bag and an out-of-tune piano.
There's an axe and an ice-making machine
And an empty doll cradle.
I use the axe to chop kindling —
It is getting so cold.

A FEW THINGS

When there is turning, breeze, bed sheet,
not always, a tin can
tied to my hangover, she,
falling from the parallel bars,
a sense of the M-80 cat
with its two and a half legs,
come home, drag if you have to, but then,
hitting on a dare with a nail
the cartridge, the firing point
is here, biting you I think,
blood, a half-written word
on the window, what's left
after the toaster was thrown through,
bird, what do you want,
a special speed limit
for the under-insured, after all,
the address was wrong, the roses
came to him, his knuckles cut
on her tooth, so just sitting here
is fine on your stoop,
he put them in water, looked at the card,
language he knew was there
but he couldn't read, himself
most of all, "I love you," well,
we're trying, the delivery guy
should have asked,
the spotter turned his head
toward the bright giggle, it was you,
wasn't it, I meant to adore,
said "here kitty kitty," lit the match,
the tingle of innocence
crossing the gym,
she never walked again

IN THESE TIMES

The ear looked funny nailed to the wall.
I kept saying that, mostly to the ear, but she said
the ear stays and that a dinner party
was the only solution. It would be nice, though,
if someone stated the problem, very precisely chiseled it
to the "New York Stock Exchange" so all could look up
and think, yes, that's a humdinger. I've been trying
for weeks to get the lake into the garage, I want to shellac it
to preserve its shine for the day when "lake" has no meaning
for our children. If I'd been clear about this,
you could have helped and I could have looked into replacing
all the warheads with umbrellas, which is your thing
like macrame was your thing in '89. God you're old,
have you noticed that? Old enough to realize
that the stories of alien visitations have died down,
either they aren't coming as often or we've grown accustomed
to the probing. Him with his run over oboe,
trying to inflate it, jack it up, coax music out of it again.
It was running away when it got hit, that's the part
he won't talk about. Even if he resurrects it, it won't stay,
I know that oboe, it's restless as any lament. Every day
when I get the mail, I look into the shot deer's eyes,
they still seem to function, to have a mind to see the world.
I know exactly the problem the deer needs to solve. Good luck,
little buddy, I think going back up the hill
with the mail, always the question on a white postcard
in my hands, "Have you seen this girl?" beside a face
someone drove away with in a car as plain as a drop of rain.

MY THREE SONS

Are tapping wing-tipped feet.
What scrapes
Has today scripted? Soon.

A building next to a body shop
Without bodies. A doctor who said,
"I know your doctor, he knows
My work."

The next building a pea soup
Color. Bent flowers
On a desk. A doctor saying,
"You are all legs." Would
That were.

Another look at the place: a leatherette
Lounger, tufts of Kleenex,
An aide asking, "Are you sure
You're all right?" I have never
Been.

Fred could have been my dad, now
Could be the sons. In a way.

ARENA ROCK

He played the bronze cowbell without a bow
Preferring pizzicato, he clanged
With *utmost* solemnity as AM radio

Broadcast "Oppenheimer on the Coast"
On an endless loop, a chronic harangue
(He played the bronze cowbell without a bow)

That grated our astronauts into Romano,
That fretted cosmonauts into drinking the Tang
With *utmost* solemnity, as AM radio

Broadcast "Schrödinger on the Meow"
In C, performed by Symphony Pyongyang
He played the bronze cowbell without a bow

Until the Tao came home to roost, he crowed,
Flicking his Bic when Peter Frampton sang
With *utmost* solemnity, as AM radio

Spluttered like a crossbred El Camino
He plugged-in, turning the knob to Sturm und Drang
He played the bronze cowbell without a bow,
With *utmost* solemnity, as AM radio.

CROSS-COUNTRY

The kid running last as the team heads through town during after
school practice,
so far behind all the others he's lost them completely, in his own
time zone,
his own ecosystem. They're at the half-way already, the drive-
thru Dunkin' Donuts
by the Unitarian church that's been closed for a year. They'll
make the turn en masse,
like some Christo running fence, head back toward the gym, pass
him on the way,
say they ordered him a mocha Dunkachino, the kid still running
to catch them,
the one with no art, no rhythm, his arms swinging sideways into
the wind, running
like a drunk holding onto a tree, running towards his father and
away from him too,
hunched in his running, Quasimodo, contrapposto, running in
his agony, stitch in his side,
Phedippides at Marathon, or pure St. Sebastian, his pin cushion
heart, or sweet John Keats
running up the Spanish Steps, heart in his hand, coughing his
lungs out for his love
Fanny Brawne, the kid running in water, running in molasses,
running like a bastard,
the kid we all know who is never going to get there, running for
his life
right into the wall, the last shall be first, the best kid of all.

GIRL ON THE PEOPLE MOVER

This girl, eighteen perhaps, driving the airport motorized cart,
the one that beeps through the terminal like the plague bell, endless,
like the heart. Her cart is empty for the moment. She drives with
one hand.
With the other she twirls her dyed and braided hair. She moves
the strand lightly,
slowly, instinctively, both with and without great care. Within the
next minute
her headset will blare, and someone, a mother perhaps, a woman
gone weary
with the weight of the walking world, will need to be moved, will
sit for a while,
Isis-proud, regal as she will ever be, her handbag resting evenly
just above her knees,
her subjects walking alongside her and then behind, empress of
the end of the world.
And she, the driven one, will come to know, vaguely, while being
moved,
that her life is all but over. Already she can see, as if from Geri-
cault's Medusa raft,
the River Jordan, the other shore, and this girl, brazenly unaware,
coming toward her
twirling her burnished and goldenized hair. But for now, for just
this moment,
the girl remains alone, moved and unmoved, her gaze free to lift
out where it wants,
somewhere further off, far away, raised up somehow, some shimmering
oasis of air
both on the horizon and just a little bit above. Her life is over too.
She is in love.

LIKE

Like, like, like.

Everything

like everything, no clear

soup, broth

from God,

a thing for itself,

totally naked:

like a woman, like a man.

Like.

The levels of being

correspond one to another, the astrologers count

abortions and stars,

a cicada sings

a song about Roland,

and I dream at night

about the mosquitoes in the

holy water.

Everything like anything,

but something

is just for something.

Tit for tat! a girl on the sands says

and kicks the other girl in the leg.

— Tit for what? the other girl asks.

— For everything!

Everything for anything,

thus subverting the present,

which is alone, is

nothing,

a point

between the double non-being,

an edge of the parabola you go along

like on a country road —

LIKE
is the essence of poetry.
WHAT
is the essence of poetry.
But WHO —
me?
You?
And what's the catch?
— Everything. Always
everything for everything.

translated by the author and Stuart Frieibert

THAT'S WHERE HE LEARNED WHAT WAR IS HE SAYS

I.

He has a feeling he might not come back
there in the avenue that narrows neatly
behind him just like in pictures.
But he's hardly gone before he's back again
I'm hardly away from the window
there he is giant-sized on a leave
that might always (he says to his wife)
be the last.

Everything about him is surprising
his voice in the hall
sounds a little different
(more like the voice of his brother
who's missing in action)
you he says and looks at her comically
and asks — I'm gone —
where's the boy.
They hunt me up
and pull me redfaced and eyes shut
from the jam-closet.
They laugh as if I were joking
and insist that I laugh too
and be hugged and kissed
till I cry.

I didn't like him any more
but now I like him again
he can tell right away and takes
all he can get.
It's the feeling of distance you have
in Russia he says
it's a mysterious country.
Later he decides to call it
Land of Contradictions.

There he is, bigger than life-sized
wants all at once to be my father again
that costs him money and a lot of talking.
I love him only when I'm riding
on the high shoulders
of this fatherman who's been to Russia.

II.

Theodor Anton Friebe (40) hit me hard
he pulled me up out of corners
doled out the blows
(in between he turned around to see
if my mother still approved
she cried but nodded bravely to each new ration).
He's an asshole I screamed
when father comes back he'll kill him
but Theo Friebe
(asthmatic, acting mayor) said:
Your father is my friend
if you're trying to blackmail me
I'll show you your father
and took the picture in both hands
and chased me with it
I dodged to one side of my father
but Friebe caught me:
Here's your father now apologize.
Friebe hit me hard in Millingen am Rhein
till with bloody nose I apologized
to my father who stayed
quietly on the piano after that.

III.

That's where he learned what war is he says
but he brought back not even a scratch
no shrapnel in his back
that would change him
later

when it was my turn to serve.
He brought back stories
of contact with the enemy
that made good telling over beer
he brought back the admission
that he'd been afraid
which didn't make it any easier
to believe him
but he stood there and made it all
make sense
"Churchill said: we killed the wrong pig"
and from '47 on
he loved me all over again
he hadn't been amputated and hadn't
not come back at all
I don't know I think
I was relieved in spite of that.

IV.

He survived
he returned as a returnee
February '47 it was bright and cold
the poplar-lined avenue frozen solid.
He took off his cap at the cemetery
he raised his hand
and waved from down below
a thin, older man.
In the house it looked as if
he were getting married
they looked at each other he hugged her
she tore herself loose and cried on the dresser.
That night relatives came
and welcomed him with home brew
my father got drunk immediately
they brought him to bed
I came behind with his shoes.
Everything began again slowly

the problems survived the marriage
for a while I wouldn't speak to him
he had lost the war.

V.

He said: I've mellowed
agreed more often with Adenauer
built a house
fought to have the last word
held down his job successfully
brought his children up wrong successfully
liked drinking
liked laughing
watched TV
mellowed and mellowed
when he was drunk
he wasn't ashamed to cry
he protested with a heart attack
the untimely pregnancies of his daughters
but the issue
he took to his heart.
He fought with his wife over who
would outlive whom
but she proved him wrong in that by dying.

translated by Eric Torgersen

WATERHOUSE'S SAINT EULALIA

When their hooks
tore my neck, I left

my body there. I'll speak
a dove, the snowfall will be

instant summer noon.
I'll speak to my head

from above, my lionhair laid
on snowy stone,

sublime mouth coughing
smoke and doves. Faith,

you are not beautiful, you
are wanting what is.

STRADIVARIUS

For the last time, not knowing
it is, she sight-reads the dead
man's sonata,

hearing in each note the
opposite silence — the yank
of her bow

from the A-string. Most days
she won't think of the music
nor suffer

its absence, a small death
when one doesn't remember
to remember

an absent thing. She won't
speak of the music and will
commemorate it

when she doesn't remember it — when
she hears a minor chord in the sound
of talk

from the cloakroom and takes her future
son on her lap and repeats to him
a word

she has always loved, though
she can't remember where
she read it.

THOSE FROM THE GARDEN, ORPHANED BACK

Those from the garden, orphaned back
to woods and meadow: wild geranium
or columbine, wild rose
with its sweet snare. And wild

carrot, its one tiny black
inkling, off-center — lace made
by a queen, where blood left its mark,
I like to think my mother

told me in that hospital
half-light. Out of her distance of
under and over
briefly, talk of time and time again,

the crooked way someone held himself,
this face or that. *I had such fun*
with you guys, she looked up
the long moment, into us.

I DO THE CAT THING, REALLY THE DOG THING

I do the cat thing, really the dog thing,
cocking my head quizzical. I call up grief
that way and quell it, some treachery,
spite. Wonder has a way of watching

its own amoeba divide: *one part will be
a brain in thousands of years, one part
a thought there.* Time to mull, to catch up
to the speed of resentment or rage. A vacancy,

not even a question. It lies there, filling in
sooner or later. Yesterday I lost
the marked trail, outwitting swampy bits
in the woods, taking dry edges until

I stood still. One minute. Two. You bet it
prayer then: o cat thing, o dog thing,
o how-the-hell-to-get-out thing. Curiosity,
here, *here*, gentle ruler of dread.

THE SCREECH OWL'S LITTLE HORSE

The screech owl's little horse
right before dawn. It neighs, it falls
at an angle, in broken bits. Who could
dream this? Who could dream past it?

Little horse out there dark, little
wrenched-from-its-feathers, as if
to cry like that gets the world to release
its warmth, the trill hits and drops *here*,

I'm here-re-re, pulled apart. The expanse
in this dollop of wilderness between
house and fence, door and alley. To own
the tree's shadow there, to say

the thing precise and stricken
and not of this earth. I'm never little
as you think, says the owl's
little horse. I watch. And I want.

ON MERCY

Knowing he was soon to be executed
the condemned man asked if first he might
have something to drink, if first he might
be drunk. please

So the soldiers brought him a drink
and because there was no hurry, another,
and one for each of them, too.

Soon they were all
very drunk, and this was merciful
because the man probably didn't understand
when they put him to the wall
and shot him.

+

I'll marry the man who can prove this happened,
the dying leaves said
in their descent.

I'll marry the man who looks through that window,
the waiting grasstips said.

But the sun went on with its golden rays
like a zealous child

and the camera-eyed bees jittered mercifully
in the distant branches.

+

The man slept on the floor
and the little mouse in his head also slept.

The soldiers didn't know who would drag him away
or where they should hide him
so they laughed nervously and one
offered the body a drink, *Ha ha,*

a toast!

then left him by the rich lady's liquor cabinet
where she'd find him when she returned from the hills.

+

*I'll marry the girl who kisses the lips
and brings a breath to them,*
the starving horses said from their fields.

*I'll marry the man who pounds the chest
and starts the heart,*
the caved-in houses said.

And the window let the light in
until the sun failed in the branches
and, like mercy,
darkness smothered the town.

+

Later in the story, her grown son wrapped him
in a parachute
and dumped him in a neighbor's yard.

Later, that neighbor, who understood bad luck,
dragged the man to another's lawn.

And so he traveled, yard-to-yard,
to the edge of town
where at last he slept by a little-traveled road
in a merciful ditch

while the bombers unzipped the sky.

+

And when the town burned, he missed it,
and when the treetops bloomed and charred, he missed it.

I'll marry the man,
the grasstips said in the hot wind,

I'll marry the girl,
the horses said, running from their burning barn, aflame,

their bodies glowing bluely in the dusk.

+

And no one proved it happened,
which was merciful for us all,

the road forgotten, the man gone to root and weed,
to marrow and tooth.

+

And if it had —

Who would find his jawbone in the loam?
Who would pick out his bullet shells and fillings,
like glitter in the new wood?

And if a man should string them
like words on a golden chain

and make from them a charm,
and give them to his wife,
wouldn't that be mercy, too?

TACHYCARDIA

Natural and pure
coming right out

of the toaster

This sun on a recyclable plate

It's for you . . .

reminds you of the time you got that window seat

a gull flying outside
simply looked in at you

that was a good day . . .

Am I in the ghetto or "the projects"

and then the bag doesn't even
fit the vacuum cleaner

the tears
the tears

and they won't take the cups off your eyes . . .

I keep thinking of that ship

Can it ever be extracted from inside the bottle
and if so
how does one stick it back in . . .

when she took off her shirt
I suddenly wanted to count to two

over and over again

how odd, she said, and looked at the palm
of my hand for a lifeline . . .

no line of credit

it's called the human heart

IDENTIFYING THE BODY

At first, I pictured his thoughts
resting in there — like coals,

which properly blown on,
could be brought back into fire.

Against the doctor's directions,
I touched his cheek; then

I knew the body was useless.
Every side of him was forever

turned inwardly away. I knelt
by the cold gurney, my face

near his hand. His last cigarettes
had filled his clothes

with smoke. That smell
was as close as I could come

to hearing him speak.

THE PROBLEM

Pretty soon you won't be doing that to get high.

You'll be doing it to get dressed.

Your time travel seminar will be meeting in room 250
Tuesday three years ago.

Eine Kleine Death Musik.

You're fired, actually.

You weren't born that way.

And it didn't happen overnight, you had to work hard all
your life to achieve it,

a power over you steadily increasing in direct proportion to
disbelief in it,

to the very evident fulfillment of your greatest fear:

you're going to live. When you wanted to quit

you could not, and when you could —

When you could you weren't about to.

GÜNTER EICH APOCRYPHA

A pretty girl asks
for my autograph,
delighted! Except
it's her cigarette
she wants signed,

then lighted. Think about it.
I do. And am
for a moment
the happiest man
that I have ever known —

I have seen my end
and it is someone else's
body, breath
and lovely
inspiration.

INTAKE INTERVIEW

What is today's date?

Who is the President?

How great a danger do you pose, on a scale of one to ten, to others or yourself?

What does "people who live in glass houses" mean?

Every symphony is a suicide postponed, true or false?

Should each individual snowflake be held accountable for the avalanche?

Name five rivers.

What do you see yourself doing in ten minutes?

How about some lovely soft Thorazine music?

If you could have half an hour with your father, what would you say to him?

What should you do if I fall asleep?

Are you still following in his mastodon footsteps?

What is the moral of "Mary Had a Little Lamb"?

What about his Everest shadow?

Would you compare your education to a disease so rare no one else has ever had it, or the deliberate extermination of indigenous populations?

Which is more puzzling, the existence of suffering or its frequent absence?

Should an odd number be sacrificed to the gods of the sky, and an even to those of the underworld, or vice versa?

Would you visit a country where nobody talks?

What would you have done differently?

Why are you here?

SALVAGE

What was the sound, a rasp?

No, not a rasp. *A rattle, then?* No, not that.

And twice it passed over you? I sat

at the waist gunner window. Night —

and the wing-tip's flashing light

bit through slanted snow: green, green.

Then we struck the mountain. *And of eight,
five were thrown free and survived?*

I was cast into deep snow

and plane-shaped debris slipped over me.

Its sound a scraping? No,

not a scraping. It slipped down the canyon wall

and I followed its snow-trough, then

guided the others to me

with blasts from my Mae West whistle.

Yours was a rescue mission, far from war?

I was alone and just overhead in the darkness

snow geese and trumpeter swans passed.

And the green light flashed?

I could hear their bodies working — *And you sat*

at the waist? — ligament, ligature, the labor

of leaving. *In unison, then? A thrum?* No,

each sound in its slender chamber. *And you*

whistled them down to you? Yes.

TROUBLING THE BODY COUNT

1 Out of Which a Noise Came

Nothing on television answered
even one

in the series of questions: who was left
standing, and how

were they arranged? Who will reassemble
the limbs and fingers

we have on file, boxed
and waiting?

Better not —

2 With Whom I Was in Love While I Was in Love with You

Did I conduct the electricity or just
describe it? I remember

a series of bodies pitted against mine.
I don't remember who invited them,

or what the arc of consent was.
The echo of it, the yes in stereo, the magnets

behind our breastbones.
The keys in our palms.

The backs of whose knees hummed — I wanted
that shoulder in my mouth
the way I held yours; and it was small, and fit there.

3 In Which We Believe

The last day.

A series of last days:

horsemen.

Whose gesture is it?

The sky,

reliable for so long, ripped open.

THE GHOST OF DOING

**

Over treasure and land some texts will say it had
Little to do with slavery or the newly

Discovered yellow planet
Few men watched the glaciers recede

From shuttles they had built
During the hemorrhage years

They had gathered the genes
Down from the ledges:

I'll be a fig or an olive tree
Or without hands

By then doctors and poets
Would have found a cure for prayer

**

Or have you shoved the door shut
In the face of the dark have you

Body and light the trap
Of retribution doing unto you

What it does to others: protest
In the streets and newspapers

And I'll leave for a faraway land
Where with pill and scalpel

And a distant reckoning
If he should lick his lips or clench his fist I shall

Find his second left toe
Infected puffy from a bump

I'll lance it squeeze out the pus and offer

Him an antibiotic I can't refuse
Therefore I am

**

The first time I saw you it was hot I was fed up
The second time your wife gave birth to a macerated boy

I had nothing to tell you about letting go of the dying
In the morning you were gone

Had carried your father back to your house
His cracked skull

I didn't know that was your wife
When I raised my voice

To those who were praying from behind the wall
To keep it down

I was trying to listen to the baby's heartbeat
With a gadget a century old

**

Anemic
From so much loss giving birth

If you give blood in the desert you won't
Get it back not your iron pills or magic hat

I put your thin
Hemoglobin up to the light and called out

To the donors Donors if you want to know
Your blood type and it's a match

You must donate
Few came some indifferent to my condition

Having not heard of it
And willing anyhow

**

And the world is south
The night a bandit with gasoline

And I am your dancing lizard mirth
I put my one arm up

And bring my one foot down on a hot zinc top
The nearest hospital was the dawn:

She didn't know her daughter on her back was
The entry wound and she the exit

She ran a brothel so
The officer said it was

Where the rebels came and went
And ran into the government boys

A femur the size of a bullet

**

A mother offers not necessarily
Sells her one-eyed son

For an education
If you'll bring him back

And stone dust for one with congenital illness
And little boy with malaria same old gas

Money mixed with blood
Transfusion the doctor's perfect record

Broken, nobility of taking
A life you

Who must walk to and from your house
The jeep's upkeep

The donkey-cart ambulance

**

The mind in the field
The brine in the field

Whether I
Is a diphthong codependent on

What isn't there to stay in the field
The good you act is equal

To the good you doubt
Most have lost many

You are either prosperous
Or veteran in the field.

**

In the one-boot-photo
I wanted for a book cover the boot

Is military black the quad a clinic's
Special forces spun by his dangling heels

From the pick-up truck
Rushed to a central

Town altered combative
With two scalp lacerations and blood

In his auditory canal:
They left one boot behind

I was a lover of loss I tossed
The boot in the capital of suffering.

**

The dying hand in hand
Ask for narcotics

And I give them
Even if this lowers the seizure threshold

Don't bet on the idiosyncratic can't
Live hostage to care

Do no harm do no harm do
You know what that means

If you don't kill
Their pain they won't pay

The rent, the dying
Two by two form a circle and ask

For sedative and anti-psychotic

They've learned suicidal ideation gets them
A place for the night.

CONTRIBUTORS

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LINDA BIERDS' **Flight: New and Selected Poems** will be published by Putnam's in October.

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DAVID DODD LEE is the author of three full-length collections of poetry, **Downsides of Fish Culture** (New Issues, 1997), **Arrow Pointing North** (Four Way Books, 2002), and **Abrupt Rural** (New Issues, 2004). Together with Donna Munro, he is editor of Half Moon Bay poetry chapbooks and is editor-in-chief of the annual anthology **Shade**.

JAN HELLER LEVI is the author of two collections of poetry, **Once I Gazed at You in Wonder** and **Skyspeak**. She is also the editor of **A Muriel Rukeyser Reader** and co-editor of **Directed by Desire: The Collected Poems of June Jordan**. She is a member of the writing faculty at Hunter College in New York City.

PHILIP LEVINE is putting together his seventeenth collection of poetry, the working title of which he's yet to discover.

THOMAS LUX holds the Bourne chair in poetry at the Georgia Institute of Technology; his eleventh book of poetry is **God Particles** (Houghton Mifflin, 2008).

WAYNE MILLER is the author of **Only the Senses Sleep** (New Issues, 2006), translator of Moikom Zeqo's **I Don't Believe in Ghosts** (BOA, 2007), and co-editor of **New Euro-**

pean Poets (Graywolf, 2008). He edits *Pleiades: A Journal of New Writing*.

ALEJANDA PIZARNIK (1936-72) is one of the major Argentine poets of the twentieth century. She was born in Buenos Aires and spent part of her life in Paris, where she was influenced by the surrealist movement. Her translator, ADAM GIANNELLI, is a graduate of the MFA program at the University of Virginia, where he was a Henry Hoyns Fellow. He is the editor of **High Lonesome: On the Poetry of Charles Wright** (Oberlin, 2006).

KEVIN PRUFER's newest book is **National Anthem** (Four Way, 2008). He's also editor, with Wayne Miller, of **New European Poets** (Graywolf, 2008). He lives in rural Missouri, where he edits *Pleiades: A Journal of New Writing*.

PETER JAY SHIPPY is the author of three books, **Thieves' Latin** (Iowa), **Alphaville** (BlazeVOX Books), and a new novella-in-verse, **How to Build the Ghost in Your Attic** (Rose Metal Press). He teaches literature at Emerson College in Boston.

JUDITH SKILLMAN's tenth book, **Heat Lightning: New and Selected Poems 1986-2006**, was published by Silverfish Review Press. **The Carnival of All or Nothing** was a finalist in the American Poetry Journal contest and is forthcoming from Cervéna Barva Press. She is an educator and translator and lives in Kenndale, Washington.

ARTHUR SZE's ninth book, **The Ginkgo Light**, will be published by Copper Canyon Press in May 2009. He is also the author of **Quipu** and **The Redshifting Web: Poems 1970-1998**.

JEAN VALENTINE was the subject of the fall 2005 *FIELD* symposium. Her most recent book is **Little Boat** (Wesleyan, 2007).

FRANZ WRIGHT is finishing a new collection of poems called **Wheeling Motel** and a three-year appointment as poet-in-residence at Brandeis. In 2007 he published **Earlier Poems** (Knopf) and two chapbooks, **The Catfish** (Marrick Press) and **Address** (Vallum).

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